



## MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

**Meeting Date:** October 17, 2019

**Agenda Item:** Sheep Creek Ranch CE, Region 4

**Action Needed:** Endorsement

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 minutes

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**Background:** The proposed Sheep Creek Ranch Conservation Easement (CE) consists of ~5,300 deeded acres in the heart of the Big Belt Mountains (Devil's Kitchen) south of Cascade. The property also includes leases to 2,500 BLM/DNRC acres and provides access to ~5,920 acres of adjoining, currently inaccessible public lands (5,400 BLM and 520 DNRC).

Sheep Creek Ranch is entirely native mountain/foothill and mountainous riparian habitat. The Sheep Creek watershed provides excellent wildlife and fisheries habitats, critical for bighorn sheep, elk, moose, mule and white-tailed deer, grizzly bear, black bear, dusky and ruffed grouse, and Merriam's turkeys. Forest carnivores such as bobcat, mountain lion, wolf, and wolverine are also present. The ranch consists primarily of conifer-dominated forest/woodland and sagebrush community types and lies within westslope cutthroat trout distribution and a restoration focal area. The property encompasses the headwaters and approximately 20 miles of the North and South Forks of Sheep Creek (and tributaries), which provide important riparian fish habitats for westslope cutthroat, brook, rainbow, and brown trout. About 4 percent of the annual rainbow trout spawning and 6 percent of the annual brown trout spawning for the Missouri River and tributaries occur in Sheep Creek. The landowner is seeking a CE to conserve and protect the wildlife and fisheries habitat and provide recreational opportunities on the property in perpetuity. A stipulation prohibiting domestic sheep, goats, and llamas would be included in the CE to protect bighorn sheep herds.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** There has not yet been public scoping for this CE; scoping would begin upon commission endorsement.

**Alternatives and Analysis:** Proposal alternatives and analysis would be developed by FWP (upon endorsement by the commission) and released in a draft EA for public review/comment opportunity.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** FWP recommends endorsement, allowing the department to further develop this proposal and conduct associated analysis, working toward a conservation outcome for this extraordinary mix of wildlife and fisheries habitats and associated public recreation opportunities.

**Proposed Motion:** I move the commission endorse the proposal to negotiate the Sheep Creek Conservation Easement and complete associated analysis.